THIRD WORLD TRAVELER

Exposing the Terrorism Trap

an interview with Michael Parenti

by David Ross

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David Ross
I'd like to start out with the title of your new book. What do you mean by the terrorism "trop?

Michael Parenti
The acts of terrorism that took place on September 11 must be seen in a wider context. The reason these people attacked us are twofold. First there are the immediate causes. They're driven by an apocalyptic religious ideology. But at the same time the question comes up, "Why did they attack the United States?" Bush says it's because we're so free and prosperous. Well, Denmark is a lot freer and a lot more prosperous than we are, so is Sweden, so are a number of other Western European countries, but they are not being attacked in this same way. So we must try to look at the larger conditional causes of terrorism. The terrorist groups that have arisen in the Middle East and Central Asia have emerged from societies in which all popular coalitions and democratic movements have been destroyed by U.S. interventionism: Turkey, Yemen, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and others. In country after country where democratic forces have tried to mobilize for political and economic democracy, where student leaders, labor union leaders, farm and peasant communal collective leaders, independent journalist, liberal clergy, women's rights advocates, various groups of people who have fought for social change in a democratic direction, these reformist democratic forces have been the object of the worst sort of oppression over the last half century. Democratic interests have been destroyed or left with nothing to hold on to.

Finding their economies, their cultures, and their societies spinning or sinking beyond their grasp, finding themselves with no control over their lives, many of these people, in a mixture of hope and desperation, turn to a kind of totalizing religious solution. One that actually preaches direct action and revenge against the evil empire, in this case, as they see it, America. But it's really not America that's doing this to them, it's the U.S. ruling class. America itself is a entity of 260 million people, of many diverse groups most of whom do not want to see their tax dollars expended and the blood of their sons and daughters spilled in far off places, the names of which they don't even know, and usually cannot even find on the map. They wonder why so much is spent on war and so little on things like local education. Their schools are falling apart. The roof on the school is leaking and the kids don't have sufficient textbooks, and school materials. And that's not just in inner cities. I know schools in California, in suburban areas, where the art teachers go out with their own money and buy art supplies for the students because the budgets have been cut back so much. And they're wondering why we have so much public poverty and so much private wealth, so much civilian poverty and so much military glut and military wealth.

U.S. Ieaders have built military bases all over the world. It seems U.S. forces have got to be everywhere, all over the world, occupying countries from Bosnia to Macedonia, to Kosovo, to Afghanistan, to Tashkent, more and more places at the taxpayer's expense. Meanwhile the quality of life in the U.S. is being neglected and deteriorating. So it's not really true that Americans are clamoring for empire. Despite the monopoly propaganda of the corporate media and national security state, Americans do at times question the terrible costs and burdens of empire. But during times of crises, real or fabricated, our leaders manage to convince people to rally mindlessly around the flag, telling them, "this is for democracy," "this is for our national security," "we've got to do this to fight terrorism." Well, what's happened? U.S. forces went into Afghanistan, destroying much of that already battered country-all supposedly to catch Osama bin Laden. They never caught him, and now they say, "Oh that's not very important anyway, we don't really have to catch him." The White House is now predicting that al Qaeda is planning some other terrorist strikes of major magnitude, coming soon. So what exactly was accomplished by waging war upon a weak impoverished battered country? People say, "Well what would you do? I would go out and hunt the terrorist cells, specifically. I wouldn't go out and bomb whole cities and villages. That's like trying to catch a flea with a giant sledgehammer. But that policy has served George Bush and his reactionaries in Washington quite well under the guise of this terrorism battle. While the rest of us, you and I, saw September 11 as a horrible, horrible tragedy, they saw it as a golden opportunity and they've been pushing their reactionary agenda ever since. The first thing George II did to fight terrorism after September 11, was to call for an additional tax cut for the very rich. And the next thing he did was to jack up the military budget even more, another 50 billion until now it's dose to 400 billion dollars. None of this enhances our security against terrorism.

What are the real motives behind US. foreign policy?

I believe the real motives behind most of U.S foreign policy-these may not be the only concerns or the only interests-but the major basic motives as measured by the kinds of countries U.S. Ieaders support and the kinds of countries or political movements they try to destroy is to keep the world safe for the Fortune 500. To make sure that the

transnational corporations and international global finance capital continues to control the land, labor, resources, and markets of most of the world, and ultimately, all of the world on terms that are extremely favorable to them. The goal is to destroy, to obliterate, to thwart any social movement or national leader who is trying for an alternative way of using the land, the labor, the natural resources, the markets, the capital of his or her country.

The most recent example is Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. Why is Chavez being portrayed as an unstable, wild-eyed demagogue? It's a very repetitive, rather obvious and predictable formula. A country tries to get out from under the U.S. global-dominated economic system. They want to develop their own society in their own way and you immediately begin to demonize their leaders. You talk about the leader being a "mercurial strong arm," "a strong man," "erratic," "dangerous," "a repressive autocrat," "another Hitler," "anti-American," and "anti-West." But it doesn't make somebody anti-American if they criticize U.S. policy and want to develop in their own way, a way that would be more beneficial for their people. If I criticize U.S policy and say, "I don't like what our leaders are doing in Iraq and Yugoslavia," "I don't like it bombing civilian populations," that doesn't make me anti-American. If I criticize what Israel is doing in the West Bank, in Jenin, in Hebron and other places, that doesn't make me anti-Jewish or anti-Semitic. That makes me anti- the particular leaders who are making the particular policies in Israel or in the U. S. right now.

I'm opposed to those policies. That's not being bigoted against America, or Israel, or France, or China. If I don't like Chinese policy in the business zones that they've set up and a number of areas, that doesn't mean I'm an anti-Asian, and a racist against the Chinese people. That is just a manipulative kind of labeling. To oppose the policies of a government does not mean you are against the country or the people that the government supposedly represents. Such opposition should be called what it really is: democracy, or democratic dissent, or having a critical perspective about what your leaders are doing. Either we have the right to democratic dissent and criticism of these policies or we all lie down and let the leader, the Fuhrer, do what is best, while we follow uncritically, and obey whatever he commands. That's just what the Germans did with Hitler, and look where it got them.

What are the domestic repercussions from the so-called "war on terror?"

I already alluded to some of them. The war on terror has enabled the Bush Administration to ram through the USA PATRIOT Act, which defines terrorism so broadly that one could almost say that the conversation we are having right now is aiding and abetting terrorism, and they could try to make a case against us. I'm not exaggerating. This "law" gives the CIA the right, once again, to operate with domestic surveillance, which they've never really stopped doing, which they've been doing in the U.S. all through these years.

But now they can be less sub-rosa about it. They can be more open and go and do whatever they want. It gives them the powers to suspend habeas corpus, to suspend our civil rights whenever they want. Well let me tell you, if under the guise of fighting terrorism they think they're going to take away our right to dissent, and our right to a trial by jury, and our right to freedom of assembly and freedom of speech, they've got another thing coming because millions of people do not agree with that hysterical, stupid,

USA, so-called, PATRIOT Act. It has nothing to do with patriotism. It is an act which that gaggle of wimps they call the U.S. Congress stampeded and ran into line to vote for by an overwhelming majority because they had to show themselves as out there fighting terrorism.

What do you believe are the real structures of economic and political power in the United States?

The real structures of economic and political power rest with the powers of very big moneyed interests that finance right-wing think tanks, pay the big paid lobbyists in Washington, and bankroll most of the big elections. If you want to run for any really important federal office-even for the U.S. House of Representatives-to wage a viable electoral campaign in one congressional district now cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The moneyed power also exists in a whole set of auxiliary institutions. The representatives of corporate America sit on the Boards of Regents, and Boards of Trustees that rule our universities and colleges. Corporate America owns the major media. They control the economy. They control the job market, the technology, interest rates, financial institutions. They have tremendous influence over Congress.

People say, "Oh, do you have a conspiracy theory, do you think people really gather together in a room and meet each other?" Certainly they meet all the time. They meet at the Bohemian Grove and the Bohemian Club in San Francisco. They meet at the Knickerbocker Club in New York. They meet at the White House. They meet at the Council on Foreign Relations. They meet at the Trilateral Commission and elsewhere. They're constantly meeting and confabulating, and selecting the right people for the right positions, the big policy-making positions in government. They're constantly setting up policies, what to do and how to do it and how this best protects the powers-that-be and the money-that-is. They don't rule entirely the way they would like to. If they ruled entirely as they'd like to, they would have wiped out social security twenty years ago. They still have to deal with the popular vote to some degree and these are precious democratic rights.

That's about all we've got left, these few rights, and sometimes not even that, as dissent is repressed or blocked out of the media. And the vote is devalued when there's nobody worth voting for. Here in California we are faced with one man named Simon who's running for Governor whose a total right-wing, big-money conservative. He's running against Gray Davis, who calls himself a Democrat, who is another conservative, big-money individual who sold his soul to the energy companies and the like. So, you often don't have a vote. I'm voting for the Green Party candidate, Peter Camejo, just as a protest vote because neither of these other two people are worth anything.

In your book you respond to the often-heard statement that everything changed after 9-11. What didn't change after September 11?

Many of the terrible things we talked about, or if they have changed, they've changed for the worst. The government is still constantly looking for ways to restrict our rights and our freedoms. The government is still giving multibillion-dollar tax write-offs to the top one percent of the population at the expense of the rest of us. You know every time they get a tax break that means that portion of the tax burden shifts onto our backs, onto the backs of the ordinary working people in America.

The government is still out there trying to destroy the environment and undermine the Clean Air Act, and the Clean Water Act as imperfect and insufficient as those Acts are-trying to roll them back. They're still trying to go after Social Security. They're still sending troops, money and military materials all over the world to suppress other people who are trying to build better lives for their own countries, trying to get some land reform, trying to get a new kind of government that would give education to the common people, that refuses to sell all the public resources off to the big corporations for a song. U.S. Ieaders, in the service of the big corporations, continue to undermine movements and governments that are trying to develop in more democratic ways, responsive to the needs of their people.

So I haven't seen all that much really changing since September 11. Now, of course, for the people who are directly impacted by the tragedy, who lost loved ones and such, their lives have changed forever and this is something they'll live with for the rest of their lives.

Do you believe our corporate-capitalist system is reformable? And if not, what is your vision of an alternative political-economic system that would be more just and egalitarian?

I see I a system in which the people who do the labor, who work and create the value in society, should be the ones who have the say as to how it will be used. And that means you've got to have elections that are not money driven but are really based on issues with clear alternative perspectives which will allow people to vote. You've got to have voting systems that are not restrictive, not an obstacle course designed to disenfranchise the poor and the dissident. You've got to have free open ballot access to a variety of parties. You should have proportional representation, which means that if a political party gets 15 percent of the vote, they will get roughly 15 percent of the representation in the State Assembly or the Congress, or wherever it may be. You should get rid of the Electoral College, which elects the president with 550 votes or so. You should have a direct election of the president by direct popular vote, so that every vote counts equally regardless of its location.

You should also have a whole change in our priorities. The corporations should be heavily taxed. They used to provide about 20-30 percent of the national revenue, and today they provide more like 6-7 percent, if that. Many of the biggest corporations don't even pay taxes. They even get a negative tax refund because they haven't paid any taxes-they have so many tax write offs, they actually get refunded for taxes they never even paid! What a system.

I would also put under public ownership some of the basic industries in our society: the utilities, the energy companies, and this sort of thing. I would develop alternative,

renewable, sustainable, energy systems: tidal energy, thermal energy, wind energy, solar power energy. These things are not pie-in-the-sky things. I hear that by 2030 Germany is going to be moving toward a point where a third or half of their national energy sources are going to come from wind. Denmark is doing the same thing. There are countries all over the world doing the same thing. There are houses in the United States, literally thousands of them, that are heated either partially are totally by solar power. One could go on. There's no mystery as to what could be done. The alternatives are there. They're not just in blueprints. They're actually being put into operation in communities.

I would support family farming and communal farming, which is often the safest farming. It's the best, and is often very efficient. It may not have that immediate, high-powered, mass productivity that the big agribusiness farms have, but the commodities that come out are usually safer and cleaner. They're not ridden with genetically engineered foods or pesticides, or not as much. The family farm and the communal farm uses the water on its own land so they don't poison it and spray it to the same degree as big agribusiness. They care for the land. In the long run they're more efficient. They don't just do cosmetic farming. They don't just discard a third of the crop because it might have some scratches on the skin of the potato or it looks irregular in its shape. They sell those potatoes too.

I would democratize our universities so that they're not run by a small group of rich businessmen who stand with ideological control over much of the faculty and administration. I would have the universities run by committees of faculty and administrators and students and staff, all of them having a say in things. It might be a little more difficult, sometimes a little messier, sometimes very wonderful and very rewarding, but it would be at least more democratic, more creative and more equitable so the universities wouldn't be serving as instruments of the big corporations as they increasingly are becoming.

That's just scratching the surface. I would take the corporate media and remind them that they are using the public domain, the airwaves. These airwaves are the property of the people of the United States. In fact they now want to sell the airwaves themselves, the actual air. They want to sell that and make that the private property of the corporate media. There are plans afoot to do that very thing. They're going in the other direction. They want to privatize our water systems, so we have to pay exorbitant prices for our water. There are now communities in India were these poor struggling families are paying 30~0 percent of their income just for water. The globalizing corporate goal is to do the same here. They're looking for commodities that people can't do without that they can grab hold of. Anything in the public sector that is being produced by the state, by the government, for the people, creating jobs and spending power, creating a tax base, fulfilling human needs- but without making a profit for the moneyed class-is hated by that class.

They want to move in and grab hold of everything, be it education, health, medical care, water supplies, electrical utilities, whatever else. Privatize, privatize, deregulate, and hand it over to the moneybags. They will charge whatever the market will bear. They will do these sorts of things and the rest of us will be their economic slaves, working just to buy the basic necessities of life. That's their goal, the thirdworldization of America-and everywhere else. They just want to get richer and richer and make us work harder and harder for less and less. That's what globalization and the "free market" are all about.

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